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NYU program spotlights media coverage of East-West relations

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New York University's new Center for the Study of War, Peace, and the News Media is preparing to turn yet another spotlight on the credibility problems confronting American journalism. And it will do this with a special focus on reporting of United States-Soviet affairs. A \$250,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York provides initial funding for the center. This constitutes one-half the proposed budget for the first three-year term.

At the center's recent opening, NYU president John Brademas explained that "the project recognizes the power of the media to form public opinion and to seek better to understand the connection between that opinion and the formation of public policy in respect to the great issues of war and peace." Print and broadcast media, he added, are not "just a conveyor belt along which information moves but they also are participants in the events they record."

He said NYU was committed "to greater knowledge and understanding of other peoples and cultures of the world." And he judges the news media among "the most powerful influences" in the life of the country in general and "certainly with regard to international events."

Prof. David Rubin, head of the NYU Journalism Department, will direct the center's work. He contends that "most people, particularly journalists, would like to leave the questions of power and influence behind the shield of the First Amendment and not talk about it. But in the area of East-West relations and the arms race," Professor Rubin says, "what the press reports matters because it can affect the climate in which defense budgets are assembled, arms talks are held, and new weapons systems are fitted into an overall strategic concept."

He adds: "Reporters should know somebody's watching them. I think one way — but not the only way — to improve press performance is letting people in the business know that someone is watching."

He cites the termination, last year, of the National News Council and the disappearance of such publications as MORE, a critical review of the media. Other magazines, he contends, give too little attention to coverage of East-West issues.

Professor Rubin hopes to attract journalists who cover the US-Soviet beat regularly to spend a week or a term at the center as

both teachers and researchers. He also welcomes visiting fellows, who wish access to NYU's data base to spend time at the center on books and other projects, including giving some lectures on their special fields of journalism. There's also the possibility of broadening the background of journalists concentrating on Soviet affairs by informally linking the center with groups like the Scientists Institute for Public Information, which gives scientific data on current social issues linked to science and technology.

"The aim," says Professor Rubin, "is to help create a constituency within the media in this particular subject area where editors and reporters will find responsible people who value what journalists do and who will watch the work and critique it."

Analyzing content, however, is only part of what the new center will do. It will also look at questions of process such as these: How much and what kind of training should be required of journalists who cover East-West relations? Are the media taking their coverage of US-Soviet news seriously enough?

Nate Polowetzky, assistant general manager of the Associated Press for foreign news, a veteran newsman of more than 40 years, applauds the idea of NYU's new center, but with reservations.

"If the purpose of the program is to allow the journalist to hone his skills by having available to him information and resources that are not easily available day to day — then good."

"But many times," he observes, "such organizations get into an adversary relationship with the press, saying it should have covered what it did not or that it went too far — making moral judgments of the press rather than an objective critique of its performance. That's the danger."

The AP already has an internal group that monitors its coverage: the Associated Press Managing Editors Committee. Made up of managing editors from the newspapers that carry the AP service, its job is to critique AP performance and point out strengths and weaknesses.

Mr. Polowetzky says that while AP tries to get the best trained people it can to send overseas — in language, academic background, and proven competence — it's still on-the-job training that counts. He views the new center at New York University as a plus for journalism if its criticisms prove constructive.

For Prof. David Rubin, the center will make a difference in three ways: (1) Improving the overall quality of press coverage through monitoring of press performance; (2) offering journalists a place to get together and to talk and learn about mutual problems and complex issues; and (3) establishing an awards program for East-West reporting to recognize those who do a difficult job well.

In the broadest perspective, says NYU's Dr. Brademas, the new center offers a high road to peace by seeking to better understand the connection between those who influence public opinion (namely the press) and the formation of public policy in respect to the important issues of war and peace.